

## The Existential Gene: Existential Ramifications of Genetic Intervention on the Child

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There are few examples of good existentialist parents. For example, Søren Kierkegaard and Arthur Schopenhauer were notoriously childless, while other existentialists famously abandoned their children to strangers. However, existentialist philosophy itself is deeply rooted in conceptions of human development, the child and adolescence. Consequently, existentialism may be a fertile area for assessing the philosophical ramifications of modern gene editing technologies which aim to change the child as we know it. This is evident in Jurgen Habermas' book *The Future of Human Nature*, where he examines the ways embryonic genetic intervention will intrude on the parent-child relationship and threaten the individual existential freedoms of both parties. The purpose of this essay is to further situate Habermas in reference to the existential works of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Satre, and to show that embryonic genetic intervention is impermissible from an existential perspective.

Embryonic gene intervention contradicts Sartre's fundamental existentialist principle that "existence precedes essence."<sup>1</sup> According to this principle, humans do not possess an innate nature or predetermined purpose. Rather, man is responsible for his own existence, and only becomes what he "wills himself to be."<sup>2</sup> Man's ability to wholly define himself is due to the fact that he does not have a creator. Sartre's atheistic account of existentialism presupposes a godless world, where humankind materialized into existence, rather than being carefully manufactured by a divine being with a determined vision of human nature. As a non-created being, man represents a new beginning — a clean slate — upon which only he can write. Sartre describes this self-determinative condition as "radical freedom." He writes that "man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does."<sup>3</sup> This radical freedom to shape the world, and oneself, is the basic characteristic of man.

However, Habermas shows that genetically programmed children may not have this basic characteristic of humanity. In contrast to Sartre's description of man, genetically programmed children are created beings, and do not represent a clean beginning, as they are born in continuity with their parents' preexistent goals and visions.<sup>4</sup> The inception of genetically programmed children can be understood through Sartre's comparison of humans to a manufactured object such as a paper knife. He writes:

"We note that this object is produced by a craftsman who

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<sup>1</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (Yale University Press, 2007): 20.

<sup>2</sup>Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 22.

<sup>3</sup>Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 29.

<sup>4</sup>Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Polity, 2016): 52.

drew his inspiration from a concept, [...] and to a known production technique that is part of that concept and is, by and large, a formula. The paper knife is thus both an object produced in a certain way and one that, on the other hand, serves a definite purpose. We cannot suppose that a man would produce a paper knife without knowing what purpose it would serve. Let us say therefore that the essence of the paper knife [...] precedes its existence.”<sup>5</sup>

Sartre uses the paper knife to represent the opposite of human freedom, but unwittingly provided a useful analogy to understand the situation of genetically programmed children. Like the paper knife, these children are created through a “known production technique” such as in-vitro fertilization paired with preimplantation genetic diagnosis. Genetically programmed children are also conditionally created to serve a particular purpose. While the purpose of a child is less clear than that of a paper knife, Habermas argues that assisted reproductive technologies create an environment where parents can choose to have a child solely if the child will fulfil some expectation. He quotes Nicholas Agar, writing that, “genetic therapies will allow prospective parents to look to their own values in selecting improvements for future children.”<sup>6</sup> Such values may include success, intelligence, or athleticism, and parents may choose one embryo over another in order to ensure the child they conceive will have their desired characteristics. For example, a parent may only want a child if they will become a successful physicist. Any embryo that does not display the intelligence to succeed in this mission will be aborted – just as a paper knife that cannot cut will be melted down. Therefore, unlike Sartre’s free man, whose “exis-

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<sup>5</sup>Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* 21.

<sup>6</sup>Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 49.

tence precedes essence,” programmed children’s “essence precedes existence.” The reversal of these conditions show that the circumstance of genetically programmed children is more akin to an object, than another free, subjective human.

The disruption of a child’s existential freedom through genetic intervention is no accident. Habermas hints that parents may use genetic intervention as a protective tool when he writes about the “programming intentions of parents who are ambitious and given to experimentation, or of parents who are merely concerned.”<sup>7</sup> Habermas does not specify what concerns parents may have, but common knowledge appreciates that parenting comes with a plethora of anxieties. Parents must be concerned for the safety of their children, their health, their development, their future successes, and their overall happiness. Above all - as Simone de Beauvoir writes in her book *The Ethics of Ambiguity* - parents are responsible for protecting their children from their own radical freedom. De Beauvoir writes that upon birth, the helpless child is “cast into a universe which he has not helped establish, which has been fashioned without him, and which appears to him as an absolute to which he can only submit.”<sup>8</sup> The child’s belief that the world is an objective place is corroborated by the adults in his life, who firmly state what is good and bad, what is allowed and what is not, when bed time is, when dinner is, and other important rules. To the child, these rules are as factual as gravity. Unchangeable and universal. These rules allow the child to believe that he too is an object, and he feels “protected against the risk of existence by the ceiling which human generations have built over his head. And it is by virtue of this that the

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<sup>7</sup>Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 51.

<sup>8</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Open Road Integrated Media, 2018): 38.

child [...] escapes the anguish of freedom.”<sup>9</sup>

Existentialists have often characterized the acknowledgement of radical freedom as a terrifying event. Understanding one’s sole responsibility as a free agent of change leaves no space for excuses about one’s own failures. Consequently, parents attempt to hide this terrifying realization from their children for as long as possible. However, as de Beauvoir observes, the child will inevitably grow into young adulthood, and as he begins to recognize the instability of his world, “he discovers his subjectivity; he discovers that of others.”<sup>10</sup> With this discovery comes the cruel understanding that his mistakes are his own, and that every choice he makes will have an impact on the world around him. It is this discovery that the concerned parent hopes to delay. With the advent of genetic interventions, parents can prevent this discovery indefinitely. When the genetically engineered child asks “why must I act this way?” as de Beauvoir says he inevitably will,<sup>11</sup> the parent may simply answer, “because I made you this way.” This confirmation by the parent that “[the child’s] hereditary factors were, in a past before [their] past, subjected to programming, confronts [the child] on an existential level, so to speak, with the expectation that [they] subordinate [their] being a body to [their] having a body.”<sup>12</sup> The child will continue to feel as though the world was made before them, as even their own body was created in a “past before [their] past,” and the control of that body still remains beyond their reach in the present. The child continues to view themselves as an objective body, rather than a subjective self. As such, the child’s freedom is restricted, but they remain blissfully unaware of the yawning

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<sup>9</sup>Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 39.

<sup>10</sup>Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 39.

<sup>11</sup>Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 39.

<sup>12</sup>Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 54.

abyss of endless choice, just as their protective parent had hoped. Of course, while this end result may be more peaceful, it denies the child the ability to live authentically and independently.

The interference of assisted reproductive technologies is not exclusive to the child's existential freedom. The existential freedom of the parent, or "programmer," is also threatened by the use of genetic intervention technologies. Imperative to existentialist thought is the relationship one subject has to another. To accept one's own subjectivity, and live as a free human, one must also accept the subjectivity and freedom of others. One must relate oneself and one's actions to the wider community, and constantly ask, "what would happen if everyone did what I am doing?"<sup>13</sup> Parents who genetically engineer their children refuse to ask this question, or refuse to analyze the possible consequences of their actions on the wider world. For example, a parent who uses preimplantation technology, and decides to abort an embryo because it is not the desired sex, must imagine themselves in the "quasi-subjective"<sup>14</sup> situation of the embryo and decide if they would have wanted their parent to make the same decision. Sartre would characterize any parent who avoids this uncomfortable question as living in "bad faith" – a state of being where the actor lies to themselves about their own freedom and capability to make their own decisions.

Parents may also lose sight of their own authentic freedom because they lose the reminder of what it means to be free. As previously stated, man's radical freedom stems from the fact that humans are not created by a pre-existent being. As Habermas comments in his writing on Hannah Arendt, each new birth is meant

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<sup>13</sup>Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 54.

<sup>14</sup>Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 50.

to provides a poignant reminder of “something new.”<sup>15</sup> A newborn child represents an entirely new subjective being that has entered the world, who will use their subjectivity to bend reality to their liking. The joy of birth ultimately lies in the “expectation of the unexpected.”<sup>16</sup> When babies are born without this radical freedom, adults are not faced with a reminder of their own radical freedom, and may forget the power they hold as subjective beings.

Additionally, parents who preordain certain characteristics for their children lose their sense of authenticity. In his book *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that an individual who is authentic is someone able to follow their own subjectivities and desires, rather than conforming to common social convention, or letting themselves get swept up in monotonous facticity.<sup>17</sup> Parents who have “intentions which later take the form of expectations”<sup>18</sup> for their child are presenting a form of inauthentic parenting. They expect their child to display certain characteristics so that they might be perceived as a certain kind of parent. For example, a parent who wishes to be a “good parent” may modify their child to be genetically predisposed to obedience. With a permanently dutiful child in tow, they can claim the fixed role of “good parent” with ease. These parents are not respecting the muddled nature of freedom. They identify themselves with the socially constructed role of “good parent,” and follow the social rules that come with this role. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir defines people who define themselves by these labels as “serious men,” and argues that they

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<sup>15</sup>Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 58.

<sup>16</sup>Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 58.

<sup>17</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, ed. Richard Moran, trans. Sarah Richmond (Routledge, 2020): 270.

<sup>18</sup>Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 51.

are hiding from their own existential freedom.<sup>19</sup> Together, Sartre and de Beauvoir corroborate that parents interested in genetic intervention should heed Habermas' caution, if not for the freedom of their children, then for their own freedom.

In the chapter "The Grown and the Made," Habermas finally presents the critiques of liberal eugenicists who argue against his theories by claiming that "genetic modification of hereditary factors [are comparable] to the modification of attitudes and expectations taking place in the course of socialization."<sup>20</sup> This liberal position posits that altering through nature is no more harmful than altering through nurture. For example, a parent who selects for the "musical" gene in an embryo is comparable to a parent who sticks their child in piano lessons at a young age. However, popular opinion seems to agree that a parent is not unreasonably restricting the child's existential freedom by forcing them to attend music lessons. Liberal Eugenicists argue that just as a child could refuse to take piano lessons anymore, a genetically programmed child could choose not to heed the genetic modifications made by their parents. A liberal eugenicist who is familiar with existentialism could argue that the suggestion that genetically altered children cannot practice freedom is an argument made in bad faith. This rebuttal would be acceptable if it did not rest on the back of the existentialist conception of equality — a concept which is dissolved by introducing genetic programming.

As previously stated, the most basic presupposition of existentialism is that all men are radically free. With this acknowledgement of one's own freedom comes the acknowledgement of the freedom of others. This creates a mutual relationship of equality, where the

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<sup>19</sup>Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 51.

<sup>20</sup>Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 49.



capabilities of the other is acknowledged as equally influential with one's own. As de Beauvoir writes, "[the] privilege, which [man] alone possesses, of being a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects, is what he shares with all his fellow-men. In turn an object for others, he is nothing more than an individual in the collective on which he depends."<sup>21</sup> Existentialism relies on this mutual subject-object relationship, where each human is born with the same capacity to imbue the world with their own subjectivity. Habermas argues that genetic intervention will suspend this mutualistic relationship, and "lay the grounds for a social relationship in which the usual "reciprocity between persons of equal birth" is revoked."<sup>22</sup> A parent who "performs treatment on an embryo approaches the quasi-subjective nature of this embryo in the same perspective as he would approach objective nature,"<sup>23</sup> and in doing so, "set[s] the course, in relevant respects, of the life history of the dependent person."<sup>24</sup> The parent imbues the "object" of the embryo with some of their own subjectivity, acting upon it without acknowledging it as a creature who will be subjective in the future. This sets up a permanently unequal relationship between the programmer and the programmed. While the programmed person may respond to the intentions of the programmer – as a child being pressured to attend piano lessons might – they can never "reverse or undo this intention."<sup>25</sup> The intentions of the parent — the intention for the child to be intelligent, athletic, or business-smart — is forever infused into the child. This allows the subjectivity of the parent to expand beyond its natural reach. It is as though the parent

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<sup>21</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 50.

<sup>24</sup> Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 64.

<sup>25</sup> Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 64.

has intentionally replaced a piece of the child's brain with a piece of their own. The child's own subjective freedom is slightly reduced to make room for the expansion of the parent's subjectivity into their will, and the child ultimately becomes more of an object than their parents. These skewed levels of subjectivity and objectivity create an irreversible situation in which the designed can never hope to become the designer. Notably, this skewed subject-object relationship is not apparent in situations of social pressure. A child who has been nurtured to act a certain way may confront their parent about their intentions, and engage in a "revisionary learning process" by exerting their own will.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, a genetically altered child does not possess the same level of subjective will as their parent, and therefore cannot engage in revising the object that is their genetic makeup.

Although few existentialist philosophers have tried their hand at parenting, their exploration of freedom, authenticity and independence provide a helpful background to understand the difficulties of parenting. Parents are responsible for raising seemingly irrational creatures who display immense amounts of obstinate freedom – often to their own detriment. From stopping a toddler from running into the street, or making them eat their vegetables, the growth of one's child into their own independent being — who is radically free to make their own mistakes can be upsetting and confusing. The genetic programming of children prevents the traumatic break from dependent child, to free individual. Additionally, it prevents adults from having to face their own looming freedom. However, as de Beauvoir writes, "love is then renunciation of all positions, of all confusion. One renounces being in order that there may be that

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<sup>26</sup>Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 62.

being which one is not.”<sup>27</sup> To show the extent of their love, parents should not attempt to control the life outcomes of their children by inserting their own subjectivities into their child’s genetic code. Rather, they should allow their child to fully explore the radical freedom shared by all.

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<sup>27</sup>Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 72.

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